

## Dialogue

---

*In Whose Face? An Essay on the Work of Alan Duff*

CHRISTINA A. THOMPSON

*Thy Kingdom Come: The Democratization  
of Aristocratic Tonga*

EPELI HAU‘OFA

*In Whose Face? An Essay on  
the Work of Alan Duff*

Christina A. Thompson

In the summer of 1993 the University of Hawai'i Press made the welcome announcement that it would launch an indigenous Pacific literature series in 1994. The series is scheduled to begin with reprints of previously published material, adding original works as it becomes established. This strategy represents a two-pronged publishing agenda: first, to make the classics (the canonical texts) of Pacific literature available to a North American audience; second, to define the cutting edge of a relatively new literary field. Both objectives seem to have informed the initial editorial decisions. At the time of the announcement, the books already under contract were three novels by Albert Wendt (*Leaves of the Banyan Tree*, *Ola*, and *Black Rainbow*), Hone Tuwhare's collected poems, *Tales of the Tikongs* by Epeli Hau'ofa, and *Once Were Warriors* by Alan Duff.

Albert Wendt is an obvious choice, as is Epeli Hau'ofa. Both are prominent figures in the Pacific and writers of international stature. The inclusion of the New Zealander Hone Tuwhare is similarly logical and seems motivated by a desire to pay tribute to one who is not only a great writer but the elder statesman of the movement represented by this series. The year 1994 will mark the thirtieth anniversary of the publication of Tuwhare's first book, *No Ordinary Sun*, and thirty years in this context is an eon. As Patricia Grace once remarked, "We are a group of firsts. Hone Tuwhare was the first to publish a book of poetry. Witi Ihimaera was the first to publish stories. I was the first woman, and Keri Hulme was the first Maori to win the Booker Prize."

But where are Patricia Grace, Witi Ihimaera, and Keri Hulme in the UH Press lineup? Where are New Zealand's three most prominent Maori novelists? And who is Alan Duff? It is perfectly possible that publishing constraints (no industry could be more labyrinthine when it comes to rights

and permissions) prevented the inclusion of Grace and Ihimaera, both of whom are represented by major international publishing concerns (though so is Wendt, for that matter). *The Bone People* is already available everywhere and so out of the question for a series like this. But it is equally likely that Duff was the editors' first choice for a Maori writer of fiction. What this seems to suggest (and will suggest, I think, to new readers of Pacific fiction) is that Duff has, temporarily at least, usurped the role of "representative Maori novelist." And that is a radical turn indeed, for no one could be less representative of Maori writing and politics thus far, nor more problematic from almost any perspective.

Until 1990 Alan Duff was the owner of a Chinese take-away in Rotorua, a small businessman with what is euphemistically described as a "colorful" past and a life that was otherwise quite ordinary. The child of a Pakeha scientist and a Maori of Ngati Rangitahi and Tuwharetoa descent, he had not written anything to speak of before he exploded the relative quiet of the New Zealand literary scene with a novel called *Once Were Warriors*. *Once Were Warriors* was a publisher's dream. An unheard of author who grabbed headlines everywhere he went, a radical novel with the capacity to shock, enrage, and inspire people of all kinds, a prose style that resembled nothing on earth, and a message that would not go away. In a country of three and a half million people, Duff's first book has sold thirty thousand copies and been reprinted eight times, enough to make it an unparalleled best seller. It was awarded second prize in the 1991 Wattie New Zealand Book Awards and has already been made into a film. Within a year it had appeared in Australia, a country which affects the greatest indifference to all things Kiwi, where it was acquired by the University of Queensland Press in a highly uncharacteristic venture. Tellingly, it has been turned down by every British publisher to whom it has been offered.

Critics on both sides of the Tasman were bowled over by Duff's debut. No one was ready to concede that he had written a perfect novel, but everyone recognized it for what it was: an instant classic that had broken the mold of contemporary Pacific fiction. Witi Ihimaera described it as "the haka, the rage" of the Maori people and "a kick in the guts to New Zealand's much vaunted pride in its Maori/Pakeha race relations." Others have described it as a kick in the Maori butt. It is certainly an "in your face" bit of writing, but the question of *whose* face (guts, butt) needs closer examination.

In 1992 Duff published a second novel, similar to the first, called *One*

*Night Out Stealing*. He had by then become a syndicated columnist with readers in every part of New Zealand. A collection of his essays was published by HarperCollins under the title *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge* in 1993; a collection of stories written for radio called *State Ward* is scheduled for release by Random House in 1994. By now, he has a substantial body of work that is largely consistent in both content and style and an equally substantial reputation. Without the sanction of the Booker or a personal chair at any prestigious institution, he has become a major literary phenomenon in the Pacific. It is time to consider what this phenomenon means.

### A POSITION OF STRENGTH, A HISTORY OF FAILURES

Alan Duff writes about the underbelly of New Zealand society, the unemployed, uneducated, urban Maori whose lives pass in a fug of alcohol and brutality, whose capacity for feeling is so blunted that they can only oscillate between futility and rage. They are a landless, assetless, futureless people with no skills, no knowledge, and no ties. They are not Maori in the "traditional" cultural sense (they do not speak the language, they have never been to a *marae*, they have no tribal affiliation), nor are they at home in the world of the Pakeha. They have nothing to do, nowhere to go, and no hope of changing places. They are just out there wreaking havoc, largely on themselves.

What makes Duff's depictions of these people both significant and compelling is that he identifies with them. "I can remember coming home from school to full-scale brawls on the front lawn. . . . Every single uncle of mine I've seen smashed his wife to pieces. Properly. So that's my inheritance. Nobody's ever said to them, you can't hit a woman. You can hit anything. Shut up, man, they say, this is my missus and she got smart" (Sullivan 1991). Duff gives the impression of resisting opportunities to talk about his sordid past, his dropping out of school, his stints in borstal and other institutions, his flirtation with gangs. But he recognizes that this is the source of his authority. As he says in the introduction to *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge*:

I wrote it [*Once Were Warriors*] because it had much, too much, to do with my childhood. What I'd witnessed. What I'd experienced. . . . I wrote it in outrage. And, quite possibly, in relief that I had not turned out as just another of

the losers I portrayed. . . . I write this because I've lived that life—because I've been on the same path of aimlessness, self-destruction and the destruction of others who have been innocents. . . . I write this because I have not only lived the life, I have long anguished, long wondered in absolute frustration at what the hell was always going so wrong with my life, the Maori life, that wasn't happening to my Pakeha counterparts. Why, and what was it, what made it so, what *kept* it so, this repeat cycle of life turning in on itself? . . . I write it from a position of strength, from a history of past failures, past wretchedness, that gives me the qualifications of first-hand experience. That's the position I write from. (1993, vii–viii)

*Once Were Warriors* is the story of Beth and Jake “the Muss” (short for muscles) Heke who live with their children in a public housing estate called Pine Block. This is a completely dysfunctional family. Beth is an abstracted drunk who vaguely realizes that something is wrong but cannot pinpoint the problem. Jake is a violent drunk who thinks with his fists, grinds his teeth in his sleep, and wakes up “wanting to *punch* somefuckin one” (50). As for the children, one ends up alone in Children's Court, while his parents sleep off their hangovers, and is forlornly shipped off as a ward of the state. Another drifts into the dangerous ambit of a gang called the Brown Fists and is subsequently murdered. And Grace, the pivotal figure, is raped by her father and hangs herself from the branch of a tree. It is not so much a matter of what, precisely, happens to these characters, as it is the relentless, crushing degradation of their everyday lives that Duff has rendered brilliantly in a relentless, breathless, brutal prose.

More appalling even than Grace's suicide are the small moments in this story, the portrayal of one of the younger children, an epileptic, finally asleep in his pee-sodden pyjamas, and his sister, awake, lying next to him, listening to her parents party up big downstairs. The drunken shouting, the broken glass, the inevitable moment:

I ain't cookin fried eggs with no boiled feed. Damned if I am. What I serve up is what you get. You're not satisfied then take a walk, Jim. This ain't a fuckin' restaurant and I ain't no one's slave. Not even his. Grace presumed her mother'd be pointing at her father. And Grace fearing for her . . .

Next instant the noise ofem all leaving. The door finally slamming. Silence again. Grace squeezing shut her eyes, pulling the blanket over her head waiting for the inevitable to follow. And it did. (28)

Or the pathetic account of the family's abortive outing to visit their son in the Boys' Home. For weeks Beth conscientiously keeps her drinking to a

minimum and saves up money for a rental car and a picnic. The day starts out well, everybody in high spirits, but as they make their way out of town they pass the pub. Just one, Jake promises. Just one, just two, just three, just four, until finally it's dark and the kids are still waiting in the car, hungry, cranky, disappointed. At last their mother comes out to tell them that they're not going anywhere after all.

Your father's fault. He's the one wouldn't come out. But four sets of eyes accusing her. (*Me.*) Then Polly asking, When're we gonna be eating the picnic? Put the fear up in Beth. Uh, tomorrow. But, Mum, it'll be stale by then. And rotten. No it won't. And if it is I'll buy a whole new lot. How's that? Beth feeling treacherous. Smiling through her teeth. And she dug into her purse. Here. Gave Grace a twenty. Go buy sumptin to eat, and you can go to the pictures after. Catch the bus home. Grace looking at her mother one last betrayed time. (110)

The sheer narrative and emotional intensity of Duff's work startled his Pakeha readers, many of whom professed to not having realized that things were really this bad. Pakeha critics, particularly, had difficulty assessing a book that they felt implicated them in an uncomfortable way. One hapless fellow went so far as to disqualify himself, nervously, in the first paragraph of his review. "I am insulated," he wrote, "by family background, career, education, income and ethnicity from the raw, cruel and morally blighted world which Duff depicts. It is the world of the Maori under-class which I know only from a scared distance, scuttling past gang members on a street corner or clucking my tongue with a mixture of smugness and compassion at the mounting statistics of Maori social deprivation and crime" (Beatson 1991). Another wrote that she would "feel more comfortable if this novel had been set in Soweto, rather than New Zealand," and described the book as having dumped "the indignities of modern-day, suburban Maoridom right slam into my precious, middle-class sensibilities" (Loates 1990). A third remarked cautiously, "No writer is more aware of his readers than Duff and he derives an ironic vigour from the knowledge that most of his readers—the genteel, middle-class—will feel distaste, discomfort, repulsion even, at the sleazy world he describes. Certainly the several scenes of violence toward women caused this female middle-class reader real physical sensations of terror" (Caffin 1992).

Pakeha readers suspected that they were being manipulated, particularly by Duff's portrayal of children, and women to a lesser extent, as the innocent victims of mindless violence. (Several balked at the scene in *One Night Out Stealing* [1992], in which a mentally ill woman with no other role in the story is gratuitously and brutally raped.) But they also already knew who was responsible in the broad sense for this social catastrophe; secretly they felt themselves to blame. What was not entirely clear at first was the extent to which Duff exonerates these readers: What was not entirely clear was that Duff's answer to the question *Whose fault is this?* is not New Zealand society as a whole, not the Pakeha colonizers, but the Maori people themselves. And here is where it gets tricky.

### BENT ACCOUNTS OF BOTH CULTURES

Alan Duff is what I think of as a bootstraps moralist and a libertarian ideologue. He is committed to notions of individual responsibility, self-sacrifice, hard work. He calls welfare the "curse upon the heads of Maori people," and insists that it "cannot be thrown off by any but ourselves" (1993, 79). He considers Western culture "successful" and Maori values and institutions anachronistic. He is increasingly unwilling to countenance the prevailing orthodoxy (common to Pakeha liberals and Maori radicals alike) that these careless mothers, these vicious fathers are themselves victims in a larger sense. He concedes that the Pakeha have done some dirty deals in the past, illegally confiscating millions of acres of Maori land. He admits that educational and employment opportunities for Maori have been somewhat less than equal under Pakeha rule. But Maori, he argues, must adapt to "an inevitable new order" and must learn to cope with "a modern society infinitely more complex and diverse than their own" (1993, 27).

One of the most startling things about Duff's work is the way he consistently renders Maori values in negative terms, recasting Maori virtues as Pakeha vices. Generosity becomes an inability to practice self-restraint, family loyalty becomes a bar to self-improvement, modesty becomes poor self-esteem, casualness becomes sloth, pride becomes arrogance. Pakeha values, on the other hand, are never critically examined. Competition does not involve oppression, individualism cannot be read as selfishness, upward mobility never translates as greed. Most Maori and Pakeha will

recognize these descriptions for what they are: bent accounts of both cultures. And most will recognize this argument as a clarion call for Maori assimilation to Pakeha ways of thinking and modes of life.

Beyond the wrong-headedness of this idea, there are some major problems with the way Duff constructs the idea of culture. What he is doing, at least in part, is confusing culture and class. How else to explain the fact that so many of the things Duff says welfare-dependent Maori do (like buying take-away food instead of cooking at home, spending money on cigarettes and alcohol instead of household necessities, borrowing money on the dole to pay for services rather than assets) are, as he himself acknowledges, characteristic of populations all over the world where there has been systematic social and economic oppression—among Hispanics and African-Americans and Aborigines and Native Americans, who could certainly not be said to share the same set of cultural values. What they do share is a relationship to the means of production and a history of European domination. To suggest that Maori poverty, ill health, poor educational levels, and high rates of incarceration are all attributable to some fatal flaw in Maori culture, some anachronistic tribal thinking, some inability to *adapt* is absurd.

Yet this is what Duff wants to argue in *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge* (1993). He does not see culture as something fluid that mutates under the pressure of historical forces; he sees it as something absolute, almost biological, as his frequent recourse to the term *race* suggests. Pakeha culture, according to Duff, is inherently dynamic (and modern) because it enshrines the idea of progress and the goal of intellectual inquiry. Maori culture, on the other hand, is “simple,” “Stone-Age,” and inherently static. It is difficult to take Duff seriously when he ventures into these realms. He is dogmatic, uninformed, and deeply irritating. These are the sorts of remarks that have caused many to dismiss him out of hand. (I recently had an instructive conversation with some Pakeha academics in Auckland who described Duff as a right-wing crank. Had they read any of his books? No, and they weren’t about to either.)

I think Duff is wrong about a lot of things, but I do not think he is wrong about everything. His ethnographic accounts of contemporary Maoridom have the unmistakable ring of truth, and his analysis of Maori tradition is at least worth taking the time to read. His history, on the other hand, and therefore his understanding of the political and economic bases of contemporary social reality, is simply bizarre. He is, one might say,



insightful when it comes to evidence and off the wall when it comes to causes and effects. And this weird combination of perspicacity and blindness in almost equal degrees is what makes him so troubling a presence.

### AN IDEAL MERITOCRACY

According to Alan Duff, the definitive quality of Maori culture is "unthinkingness": "The Maori of old, as of now, never had to think for himself; his decisions were made for him. His knowledge, all that he'd likely need, was already learnt orally off by heart by the select holders of knowledge. He was never reared to ask questions back then; he is not raised to ask questions now. To question is to defy. To defy is to deserve whatever punishment comes your way" (1993, 6). This "unthinkingness," he argues, derives from three related aspects of traditional Maori culture: a hierarchical political structure based on descent, a rigid cultural construction of authority and obedience, and a tradition of orality wherein esoteric knowledge is the province of the select few. Maori, he argues, are trained from birth to accept the authority of high-born males who, in turn, use their exclusive access to arcane knowledge (the genealogy, the history, the ritual) as an instrument of power to secure their own positions as members of the elite. It is a closed circle of influence and prestige from which the marginal (low-born, female, immature, and so on) are institutionally excluded. A similar argument is commonly mounted by leftists and feminists to explain the mechanisms of capitalist and patriarchal oppression. Indeed, Pakeha control over the government, the courts, the universities, and other institutions in New Zealand is often explained in terms of limited access to the sources of power. Because Duff is unwilling to criticize the Pakeha, this point does not occur to him. In Pakeha society, he insists, the movement of social classes is fluid, and access to knowledge and power is universal.

At the core of Duff's argument is an attack on the institutions of Maori leadership. Jake Heke in *Once Were Warriors* harbors the dark secret that he is descended from slaves. This struck me, when I first read the book, as an oddly anachronistic notion. I would not have thought there was any legacy of tribal slavery in Maori social relations today, or that there was even much awareness of a practice that is probably badly translated by that term. What Duff is talking about, however, is something that does affect contemporary Maori social relations (although probably not to the

extent that he would like to make out, and certainly less among the people he is describing than among *marae*-based *whanau*), and that is the significance of descent.

Duff hates the idea of an aristocracy. He is not opposed to rule by the few (the thought of communism appalls him), but his ideal state is a meritocracy in which leadership is earned, not one in which it is a right of birth. Duff is similarly scathing about the Maori practice of assigning precedence according to age, a principle that still organizes much Maori social behavior and one that is probably more significant these days than the complex (and, to many, now obscure) issue of descent. Duff's charge that merely having lived a long time hardly qualifies anyone for leadership is an attack on the very core of Maori culture. It is not surprising that his views on the matter have earned him the ire of several prominent Maori leaders, in whose ears the expression "pig-ignorant *kaumatua*" is undoubtedly still ringing.

So offensive are some of his remarks on this subject that one is half-tempted to psychologize, to read into his analysis of authority a personal sense of hurt. Perhaps the more interesting question to ask is *Who* is pig-ignorant? By his own admission, Duff did not become acquainted with *marae* protocol (and all that it implies) until late in life, and then only grudgingly. While he would argue that his distance from Maori cultural institutions enables him to judge them with a critical eye, one might equally well suggest that this distance bars him from criticizing them at all, on the grounds that he knows not whereof he speaks.

The issue is further complicated because Duff's views on this subject are not entirely consistent. In *Once Were Warriors* the *kaumatua* 'elders' are depicted positively as the door through which the contemporary generation must pass in order to recover its cultural sanity. At the *tangi* 'funeral' for her daughter, Beth is forced to sit through an oration by her elders and only then does it dawn on her that there is some hope for her people.

He is saying, Beth, that we are what we are only because of our past . . . and that we should never forget our past or our future is lost . . . Beth wondering if perhaps that was what ailed her people: their lack of knowledge of the past. A history.

Now he speaks of an ancestor who was a great poet as well as a warrior . . . of the great poems he composed for his loved ones lost in a great storm whilst at sea, fishing. Now, Beth, it is a master carver he speaks of. Ah, and this time—Matawai chuckling—it is of a great lover ancestor who had many many wives. (1990, 124)

But the very visions that, in the novel, are represented as the keys to the salvation of Maoridom (the importance of relearning the *reo* 'language', the significance of the family, or *whanau*, the necessity of communal effort) are rudely repudiated in the essays as maladaptive strategies promoted by "wind-filled gourds" and "culture vultures" with six-figure incomes. "Will a haka," Duff asks bitterly in *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge*, "explain the financial position of a company to a board of directors? Will an ancient waiata persuade a bank to invest in a business venture? Will learning the traditional flax weaving arts, the carving skills, give its students an in-depth knowledge of financial global affairs? Will a long-winded speech in Maori do anything to assist a massive Futures trade on the New York stock exchange?" (52).

It is beyond me to reconcile the contradictions in his work, but it seems that Duff is becoming more recalcitrant with the passage of time. My guess is that this overall shift to the right, away from more "progressive" ideas about the recuperation of traditional knowledge and practices, stems from an unwillingness to be co-opted by the liberal Pakeha establishment, which is inclined to sentimentalize Maori "traditions," and which Duff himself, as an upwardly mobile member of the working class, simultaneously resents and romanticizes.

If Duff's assessment of Maori culture is unsettling, his view of the Pakeha is grotesque. His Pakeha characters seem to float in a cocoon of comfort and privilege, surrounded by beautiful things, endowed with natural graces. The most memorable examples are probably the scenes from *Once Were Warriors* in which Grace peers longingly from her perch in a tree (the same tree from which she ultimately hangs herself) into the brightly lit interior of a well-to-do Pakeha home, contemplating the gulf that separates the two peoples. Duff's tendency to idealize the Pakeha world has been commonly perceived by critics as a flaw. One writer, however, justified these portrayals as a fair depiction of the Pakeha world as seen from "the distorted point of view of the agonised Maori enclave" (Crean 1990). This is a clever way of defending Duff's views, but I'm inclined to think the issue is more problematic.

In Duff's second novel, *One Night Out Stealing* (1992), the opposition between privilege and poverty reappears—minus the inherent pathos of the child's point of view. This is a story about two hoods (one Maori, one Pakeha) who burgle a house in a posh section of Wellington. Here it is not so much a question of presenting a limited view of the Pakeha seen through the eyes of the disenfranchised, as of depicting two apparently

separate worlds, one glamorous and good, the other degenerate and ugly. If anything, Duff seems determined to naturalize the economic relationship between New Zealand's two cultural groups (and two classes). There is no sense in this novel of the social price paid for Pakeha privilege, no sense of a relationship between the luxury that Pakeha money commands and Maori impoverishment. Rather, we are presented with the Maori character's apparently sincere desire to be uplifted through contact with Pakeha wealth (symbolized by persian carpets, classical music, and so on). This is at once moving and horrifying: moving because who cannot empathize with the desire to have what is out of reach? horrifying because of the implication that to be rich (and Pakeha) is to be a fully realized human being.

### THE MYSTIC CHORDS OF WAR

Duff asserts that Maori do not question the status quo because their culture prevents them from doing so. The obvious retort to this is, first, that there is a long-standing tradition of Maori resistance to Pakeha oppression. Beyond that, however, if Maori do not appear to question the status quo, it may be because the Pakeha would prefer them not to. It has certainly been in the Pakeha interest to convince Maori that they should not think, ostensibly because they are not good at it, but really because if they did all hell would break loose. A better illustration of the way Maori identity has been reconstructed by and for the Pakeha could not be found than James Belich's study of the New Zealand wars. Belich argues that British and colonial historians have systematically denied the role played by Maori strategic ability in the wars of the colonial period. While Maori courage, chivalry, brute strength, and some limited types of skill were conventionally conceded, the dominant view held that in matters of military genius they, like other "savage races," could never compete with the British mind (Belich 1988).

This view of Maori as tuned to the mystic chords of warfare has a wonderfully long and complex history in the annals of New Zealand. It is present in the earliest European descriptions of the country; it is the centerpiece of every contact encounter; it is historically the single most important feature, a defining characteristic if ever there were one, of Pakeha accounts of Maori from the eighteenth century onward. In Duff's work this "cultural invention" is refigured as "authentic Maori tradition." At the

end of *Once Were Warriors* a *kaumatua* exhorts the residents of Pine Block to remember their warrior heritage.

He told them of great acts of chivalry during the warring with the first white men: of warriors—that's *Maori* warriors—slipping out into the battlefield at night to tend to the wounded enemy, giving the enemy food, drink, even touches of comfort. And the gathering going, Wow, far out, but why? And the chief's eyes with that fighting fire in them saying: So the enemy might have more strength to continue the battle in the morning. And the crowd went, Ooooh! Smiling all over. Thinking: but we never knew that. No one taught us this at school. They taught us *their* history: English history. (1990, 178)

To any student of the British Empire, however, it is obvious that *this* is English history too. This tale, or one like it, of courtesy to the enemy is not only a commonplace of English romance, it is one of the stock legends of New Zealand history.<sup>1</sup> It is part and parcel of a European myth of Maori conduct, the effect, if not the overt purpose of which has been to redefine Maori capacity and conduct within “acceptable” limits. To damn by faint praise, as it were.

Duff, however, wants to argue for a Maori cultural predilection for violence, which in pre-Pakeha days was expressed (heroically) as a warrior ethos, and in the contemporary world is manifest in a residual and degraded but nonetheless recognizable form. Here we see the other side of the “unthinkingness” coin. Maori may not know how to think, but they are and always have been unsurpassed in matters physical. (Duff cites the familiar examples of Maori achievement in rugby and modern war as illustrations.) The depth of the crisis in Maoridom today, he argues, can be measured as the distance between the heroism of the past and the mere “toughness” of the present.

At the contemporary end of this scale are people like Jake Heke.

Jake's world was physical; and he was aware it was physical. He assumed damn near the whole world was seeing the same. It was there when he woke each day (or night) in the canvas of his mind as physical. He saw people all over—but mostly men—and they were engaged in physical combat, the subjects of combative consideration, their fighting potential, how fast they'd likely be, how good a hit they carried and was it in both hands or just a normal one, right or left (in that order too) . . . His mind covered the field of physical confrontation. He saw others in terms of their fighting potential first, before he saw anything. Even on the TV, when he watched the damn thing, he always

looked at some dude and wondered if the dude could fight or not . . . it never occurred to Jake that there might be something wrong with his outlook, perhaps his mind. It couldn't: damn near every man he mixed (drank) with thought the same. He was sure they did. Besides, wasn't as if a man was *only* about fighting—course he weren't. He thought about other things. You know, sport—he liked sport, especially rugby league . . . and he just *loved* the boxing, the bigtime stuff they showed on the TV . . . a man'd be inspired for weeks after watching one of them black master boxers fighting . . . And anyway, he thought about other things too . . . other sports . . . ah, even political things . . . Oh, and life. Sure, why not? Don't everyone think about life . . . But it was violence that Jake Heke was most tuned to. (50–51)

Jake Heke is every angry, confused, and frustrated Maori male; he is Alan Duff in an earlier incarnation; he is the measure, the touchstone, the epitome of the vain, blind, self-destructive impulses that, in Duff's view, are destroying Maoridom today. But where does this madness come from?

Again, Duff offers conflicting answers. Beth, in the first novel, thinks to herself:

We used to be a race of warriors, O audience out there. You know that? . . . And we used to war all the time, us Maoris. Against each other. True. It's true, honest to God, audience. Hated each other. Tribe against tribe. Savages. We were savages. But warriors, eh. It's very important to remember that. Warriors. Because, you see, it was what we lost when you, the white audience out there, defeated us. Conquered us. Took our land, our *mana*, left us with nothing. But the warriors thing got handed down, see. Well, sort of handed down; in a mixed-up sense it did. It was more toughness that got handed down from generation to generation. Toughness, eh. Us Maoris might be every bad thing in this world but you can't take away from us our toughness. (47)

Here Duff registers, implicitly at least, the relationship between conquest and cultural values, the way in which historically constructed power relations can change the way people think about themselves. He comes perilously close here to conceding that the toughness in which Maori take so much pride is a product of their historical relationship to the Pakeha. That far from being *essentially* aggressive, Maori are *conveniently* aggressive. That Maori belligerence has been magnified at the expense of "softer" attributes like humor, discretion, warmth (an argument can be made for the "masculinization" of Maori culture in the postcontact period and the consequent disempowering of Maori women within their own culture), with the result that Maori appear "naturally" more in need of incarceration

tion, punishment, and control. That, in keeping with the manichean tendencies of modern European thought, Maori have been constructed as the passionate, violent, physical alter ego of the cool, cerebral Pakeha self. Likewise, when Duff suggests that what makes “young warriors” join up with gangs has “sumptin to do with race, with being a Maori and so being a bit on the wild side *when you compared with the other race, the ones running the show*” (74, my emphasis), we get a glimpse of the larger, structural framework. But it is crucial to recognize that Duff is simultaneously, fundamentally asserting that qualities like “staunchness” inhere in Maori culture (“race”). Always have, always will.

### SOMETHING LIKE EXPRESSIVE FORM

What we have in Alan Duff’s work is a most interesting example of something like expressive form. Duff himself is taking the “staunch” line in refusing to accord the Pakeha the power to define what he is. His unwillingness to accept that Maori “warlikeness” is to any extent a Pakeha invention, or Maori “unthinkingness” anything other than a cultural flaw, amounts to an aggressive assertion of his own mana and the mana of Maori at large. In fact, the thrust of Duff’s argument is entirely consistent with the cultural attitudes and values that he has argued interfere with Maori success. He is at once unthinking and aggressive, and therein lie both the strengths and the weaknesses of his work. With but a minor shift in the terms of reference, Duff’s posture replicates that of Jake Heke. From this perspective, it becomes easier to understand why Pakeha liberalism is offensive to Duff. It is one of the ironies of modern liberalism that those who have the most to lose are forever championing the right of others to take it away from them. This, in Duff’s eyes, is a “mana-less” endeavor and nothing he would ever want to be accused of.

When Witi Ihimaera, whose own books much more closely and self-consciously resemble canonical European texts, described Duff’s work as a *haka*, he hit the nail on the head. Duff’s work is a challenge, in the form of insult, to Maori to prove their own worth. Whether or not you agree with his views about how that challenge should be met, it is extremely important to understand that what Duff is about, as much as anything, is a reassertion of Maori power to determine the course of Maori lives. This is the real significance of his work. Duff’s is merely one of several possible strategies for dealing with a bad situation. It may not appeal to Pakeha



intellectuals, but it is not supposed to. It may not appeal to Maori, but that is a matter for debate within the Maori community. If he is fatalistic about the future of "traditional" practices, that is something for Peter Sharples to take up, not something for me or anyone else with no vested interest to get pious about. I don't happen to agree with Duff (my own view is that the imbalances in New Zealand at present are such that only an aggressive program of cultural and linguistic education, through such movements as *Kohanga Reo* and *Kura Kaupapa*, will do; I think *everyone* in New Zealand should be taught to speak Maori). At the same time I think it grossly patronizing to insist, as a Pakeha, that the only good Maori is a "traditional" Maori, or that Duff has proved himself a ratbag of the highest order by suggesting that Maori compete on Pakeha terms.

The one thing that has gone without saying so far is that these may not be mutually exclusive objectives. In a way Duff's greatest failing may be that, even at his most utopian, he refuses to entertain this idea.

### Note

1 See, for instance, Walter Scott's *Lady of the Lake*. In the New Zealand context see Vayda (1960, 43n), who noted that he was unable to substantiate any of the known versions of this tale.

### References

Beatson, Peter

1991 Review of *Once Were Warriors*. *Landfall* 45 (3): 365-366.

Belich, James

1988 *The New Zealand Wars*. Auckland: Penguin.

Caffin, Elizabeth

1992 Alan Duff's Writing Far More Than Raw Genius. *Dominion* (Wellington), 19 September.

Crean, Mike

1990 Glimpse of Hope for the Maori People. *Christchurch Star*, 25 November.

Duff, Alan

1990 *Once Were Warriors*. Auckland: Tandem.

1992 *One Night Out Stealing*. Auckland: Tandem.

1993 *Maori: The Crisis and the Challenge*. Auckland: HarperCollins.



Loates, Lynne

1990 More on Books. *More*, December.

Sullivan, Jane

1991 His Tale Aims to Restore Warrior Pride. Interview in *Age* (Melbourne),  
21 September, 8.

Vayda, A. P.

1960 *Maori Warfare*. Wellington: Reed.